

Aging and Gay, and Facing Prejudice in Twilight

By JANE GROSS

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Even now, at 81 and with her memory beginning to fade, Gloria Donadello recalls her painful brush with bigotry at an assisted-living center in Santa Fe, N.M. Sitting with those she considered friends, "people were laughing and making certain kinds of comments, and I told them, **'Please don't do that, because I'm gay.'**"

The result of her outspokenness, Ms. Donadello said, was **swift and merciless**. "Everyone looked horrified," she said. **No longer included in conversation or welcome at meals, she plunged into depression. Medication did not help. With her emotional health deteriorating, Ms. Donadello moved into an adult community nearby that caters to gay men and lesbians.**

"I felt like I was a pariah," she said, settled in her new home. "For me, it was a choice between life and death."

Elderly gay people like Ms. Donadello, living in nursing homes or assisted-living centers or receiving home care, increasingly report that they have been disrespected, shunned or mistreated in ways that range from hurtful to deadly, even leading some to commit suicide.

Some have seen their partners and friends insulted or isolated. Others live in fear of the day when they are dependent on strangers for the most personal care. That dread alone can be damaging, physically and emotionally, say geriatric doctors, psychiatrists and social workers.

The plight of the gay elderly has been taken up by a generation of gay men and lesbians, concerned about their own futures, who have begun a national drive to educate care providers about the social isolation, even outright discrimination, that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender clients face.

Several solutions are emerging. In Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta and other urban centers, so-called L.G.B.T. Aging Projects are springing up, to train long-term care providers. At the same time, there is a move to separate care, with the comfort of the familiar.

In the Boston suburbs, the Chelsea Jewish Nursing Home will break ground in December for a complex that includes a unit for the gay and lesbian elderly. And Stonewall Communities in Boston has begun selling homes designed for older gay people with support services similar to assisted-living centers. There are also openly gay geriatric case managers who can guide clients to compassionate services.

"Many times gay people avoid seeking help at all because of their fears about how they'll be treated," said David Aronstein, president of Stonewall Communities. "Unless they see affirming actions, they'll assume the worst."

Homophobia directed at the elderly has many faces.

Home health aides must be reminded not to wear gloves at inappropriate times, for example while opening the front door or making the bed, when there is no evidence of H.I.V. infection, said Joe Collura, a nurse at the largest home care agency in Greenwich Village.

A lesbian checking into a double room at a Chicago rehabilitation center was greeted by a roommate yelling, "Get the man out of here!" The lesbian patient, Renae Ogletree, summoned a friend to take her elsewhere.

Sometimes tragedy results. In one nursing home, an openly gay man, without family or friends, was recently moved off his floor to quiet the protests of other residents and their families. He was given a room among patients with severe disabilities or dementia. The home called upon Amber Hollibaugh, now a senior strategist at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the author of the first training curriculum for nursing homes. Ms. Hollibaugh assured the 79-year-old man that a more humane solution would be found, **but he hanged himself**, Ms. Hollibaugh said. She was unwilling to identify the nursing home or even its East Coast city, because she still consults there, among other places.

While this outcome is exceedingly rare, moving gay residents to placate others is common, said Dr. Melinda Lantz, chief of geriatric psychiatry at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, who spent 13 years in a similar post at the Jewish Home and Hospital Lifecare System. "When you're stuck and have to move someone because they're being ganged up on, you put them with people who are very confused," Dr. Lantz said. "That's a terrible nuts-and-bolts reality."

The most common reaction, in a generation accustomed to being in the closet, is a retreat back to the invisibility that was necessary for most of their lives,

when homosexuality was considered both a crime and a mental illness. A partner is identified as a brother. No pictures or gay-themed books are left around.

Elderly heterosexuals also suffer the indignities of old age, but not to the same extent, Dr. Lantz said. "There is something special about having to hide this part of your identity at a time when your entire identity is threatened," she said. "That's a faster pathway to depression, failure to thrive and even premature death."

The movement to improve conditions for the gay elderly is driven by demographics. There are an estimated 2.4 million gay, lesbian or bisexual Americans over the age of 55, said Gary Gates, a senior research fellow at the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. That estimate was extrapolated by Dr. Gates using census data that counts only same-sex couples along with other government data that counts both single and coupled gay people. **Among those in same-sex couples, the number of gay men and women over 55 has almost doubled from 2000 to 2006, Dr. Gates said, to 416,000, from 222,000.**

California is the only state with a law saying the gay elderly have special needs, like other members of minority groups. A new law encourages training for employees and contractors who work with the elderly and permits state financing of projects like gay senior centers.

Federal law provides no antidiscrimination protections to gay people. Twenty states explicitly outlaw such discrimination in housing and public accommodations. But no civil rights claims have been made by gay residents of nursing homes, according to the Lambda Legal Defense Fund, which litigates and monitors such cases. Potential plaintiffs, the organization says, are too frail or frightened to bring action.

The problem is compounded, experts say, because most of the gay elderly do not declare their identity, and institutions rarely make an effort to find out who they are to prepare staff members and residents for what may be an unfamiliar situation.

So that is where Lisa Krinsky, the director of the L.G.B.T. Aging Project in Massachusetts, begins her "cultural competency" training sessions, including one last month at North Shore Elder Services in Danvers.

Admissions forms for long-term care have boxes to check for marital status and next of kin. But none of the boxes match the circumstances of gay men or

lesbians. Ms. Krinsky suggested follow-up questions like "Who is important in your life?"

In the last two years, Ms. Krinsky has trained more than 2,000 employees of agencies serving the elderly across Massachusetts. She presents them with common problems and nudges them toward solutions.

A gay man fired his home health aide. Did the case manager ask why? The patient might be receiving unwanted Bible readings from someone who thinks homosexuality is a sin. What about a lesbian at an assisted-living center refusing visitors? Maybe she is afraid that her friends' appearance will give her away to fellow residents.

"We need to be open and sensitive," Ms. Krinsky said, "but not wrap them in a rainbow flag and make them march in a parade."

Some of the gay elderly chose openness as the quickest and most painless way of finding compassionate care. That is the case for Bruce Steiner, 76, of Sudbury, Mass., whose 71-year-old partner, Jim Anthony, has had Alzheimer's disease for more than a decade and can no longer feed himself or speak.

Mr. Steiner is resisting a nursing home for Mr. Anthony, even after several hospitalizations last year. The care had been uneven, Mr. Steiner said, and it was unclear whether homosexuality was a factor. But Mr. Steiner decided to take no chances and hired a gay case manager who helped him "do some filtering."

They selected a home care agency with a reputation for treating gay clients well. Preparing for an unknown future, Mr. Steiner also visited several nursing homes, "giving them the opportunity to encourage or discourage me." His favorite "is one run by the Carmelite sisters, of all things, because they had a sense of humor."

They are the exception, not the rule.

Jalna Perry, a 77-year-old lesbian and psychiatrist in Boston, is out, she said, but does not broadcast the fact, which would feel unnatural to someone of her generation. Dr. Perry, who uses a wheelchair, has spent time in assisted-living centers and nursing homes. There, she said, her guard was up all the time.

Dr. Perry came out to a few other residents in the assisted-living center -- artsy, professional women who she figured would accept her. But even with them,

she said, "You don't talk about gay things." Mostly, she kept to herself. "You size people up," Dr. Perry said. "You know the activities person is a lesbian; that's a quick read."

Trickier was an aide who was gentle with others but surly and heavy-handed when helping Dr. Perry with personal tasks. Did the aide suspect and disapprove? With a male nurse who was gay, Dr. Perry said she felt "extremely comfortable."

"Except for that nurse, I was very lonely," she said. "It would have been nice if someone else was out among the residents."

Such loneliness is a source of dread to the members of the Prime Timers, a Boston social group for older gay men. Among the regulars, who meet for lunch once a week, are Emile Dufour, 70, a former priest, and Fred Riley, 75, who has a 30-year heterosexual marriage behind him. The pair have been together for two decades and married in 2004. But their default position, should they need nursing care, will be to hide their gayness, as they did for half a lifetime, rather than face slurs and whispers.

"As strong as I am today," Mr. Riley said, "when I'm at the gate of the nursing home, the closet door is going to slam shut behind me."

LGBT Elders Fear Abuse in Long-Term Care Facilities Says New Report

- by Steve Williams
- April 6, 2011

A majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders fear that they will experience discrimination in long-term care facilities, and more than half believe staff or even other residents would abuse or neglect them, the results of a national online survey has found.

Called *LGBT Older Adults in Long-Term Care Facilities: Stories from the Field*, the report is based on a survey of 769 respondents conducted from October 2009 through June 2010. The survey did not use a representative or scientific sample but did take comments from respondents on their experiences with long-term care and treatment.

Not all respondents actually identified as LGBT, with many identifying as family or close friends, care providers, legal advice providers and other interested parties.

Around 853 instances of mistreatment were reported as part of the survey, identifying possible violations of federal nursing home laws.

Other key findings of the report include:

- Only 22% said they could be open with facility staff
- 89% predict that staff would discriminate
- 43% reported 853 instances of mistreatment
- 93 respondents reported restrictions on visitors
- 24 respondents reported denial of medical treatment
- Many highlighted the importance of health-care power of attorney

The report was prepared by the National Senior Citizens Law Center in collaboration with Lambda Legal, National Center for Lesbian Rights, National Center for Transgender Equality, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE).

The report gives suggestions on how simple changes to public information and training for long-term care staff would benefit LGBT elders and ensure that they receive the very best of care that takes into account their specific needs in the landscape of LGBT-rights as it stands.

The website www.LGBTLongTermCare.org houses the report and is a place where LGBT elders and those responsible for the care of LGBT elders can find further information and resources on issues surrounding LGBT adult care.

The website also displays media and videos from LGBT elders. The following is of the highly acclaimed Phyllis Lyon, a well known lesbian-identifying activist:

Read more: <http://www.care2.com/causes/lgbt-elders-fear-abuse-in-long-term-care-facilities-says-new-report.html#ixzz1nAl8KAeC>

News

California City Approves Gay Retirement Community

by Kilian Melloy

Wednesday Apr 7, 2010



GLBT elders and their lives as glimpsed in the upcoming documentary Gen Silent (Source:Stu Maddox)

Santa Rosa, California, is slated to see the construction of a new GLBT retirement community--a project that had faced stiff initial resistance, with opponents citing everything from greenhouse gas production and a loss of trees, to a too-dense population of 148 housing units on a parcel of land just under 10 acres.

But once the project came to a vote in the Santa Rosa City Council, it was approved in a mere half hour--despite the project having taken five years to get that far. Local newspaper the Press Democrat reported on April 6 that there had been concerns that the real motives behind opposition to the project had more to do with anti-gay animus than environmental concerns; indeed, one councilmember who voted against the project cited emails that she had received from community residents who didn't want to see the retirement community go forward.

The community is to be called Fountaingrove Lodge, the Press Democrat reported. Homeowner's association president Skip Epperly remains opposed to the project, even though it had been scaled back and provisions to preserve the area's natural beauty have been incorporated; Epperly says that the community might expand at a later time on to two additional parcels.

But those parcels are for sale, rejoined a spokesman for Aegis Senior Living, the company planning to build the community. Santa Rosa is a picturesque city north of San Francisco in a region known for its vineyards.

The plight of GLBT seniors has been given increasing scrutiny in recent years, with even the New York Times reporting on horrifying allegations of anti-gay harassment and shunning experienced at facilities for senior Americans by GLBT elders who may have been among the forefront of gay liberation, but who now feel pressured back into the closet in order to survive.

The market for GLBT retirement homes and retirement communities has been uncertain; in 2008, the economic meltdown caused the delay of projects to address the needs of GLBT elders in Palm Springs and Boston. Even so, both in America and abroad, the idea of GLBT-specific facilities and communities remains a vital one, given that gay baby boomers are aging right along with the rest of their cohort.

There are other issues that elder GLBTs face, too. Even if they secure safe housing, will they be isolated? Many GLBTs have no children, and may even have lost ties with their relatives. And then there's the fact that gays--perhaps even more so than straights--are ageist: older gays simply cease to register on the wider social radar. Such issues also need to be addressed, Michael Adams, the executive director of Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) suggested to EDGE in a Sept. 15, 2009, interview.

"There's a critical shortage of quality housing for elderly people in general in this country," noted Adams. "Also, there's the additional problem of a place where we can be out and comfortable simply being who we are. When you put those two together, it's a real double whammy.

"We have seen emerged a very small number of LGBT communities" designed to address the needs of gay elders, Adams said. "But the reality is that the vast, vast, vast majority will never live in those places. So we have to fundamentally challenge and open up the vast array of existing housing so that they are welcoming."

Filmmaker Stu Maddux told EDGE in an interview about his upcoming documentary Gen Silent that there may yet be hope--from the very same gay elders who fought for GLBT rights in their younger days. "I think it's going to subside," Maddux said of anti-gay animus among older Americans and the health care providers upon whom they rely. "I don't think it'll go away. I'm from the Midwest, and I know from my background that the wheels move slow. It's going to take our lifetime to get [the medical system for elder care] ready for the young people coming out today. I am hopeful about that, much more so than for my generation, people already in their 40s.

"But I think the most important thing is to record the history of the people who are there now, in their 70s and 80s," Maddux added, "because we're going to be looking to them when we're their age for examples of how we got through all this. They are the silent generation, having to cut the path for all of us. And now we owe it to them to make sure that they aren't silenced at the end."

Kilian Melloy is EDGE Media Network's Assistant Arts Editor. He writes about food, drink, and travel, reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary.

Retirement options grow as gay boomers find more mainstream acceptance

December 9, 2012 — By Jen Christensen — CNN

(CNN) -- The generation of gays and lesbians that literally created the modern LGBT movement -- from the heroes of the 1969 **Stonewall riots** to their slightly younger friends -- is at, or nearing, retirement age.

That used to mean the beginning of an extremely difficult time in an LGBT person's life. But as gay baby boomers find more acceptance in mainstream society and continue to do what they've always done -- push to make a better world for the LGBT community -- their retirement options are slowly improving. That is, if they decide to retire at all.

"The notion of retirement has never been a part of my vocabulary," said **Bob Witeck**, CEO and co-founder of Witeck Communications.

Nearly 61, Witeck has put some thought into what he should do with his strategic public relations and marketing firm as he gets older. Like many friends his age who are also entrepreneurs, he plans to keep working.

"Because I run a business, as I get older I can change the intensity of my engagement in the kinds of work I take on," Witeck said. "I know I'm lucky that way, and I'm lucky in my personal life as well. My husband is 50, so I have a younger man to help me if I need it," he said, laughing.

For decades, according to **published studies and reports**, many LGBT seniors entered into a kind of dangerous isolation, because the majority **did not have children or spouses** to help care for them. Even if they did have the benefit of a partner to help as their health declined, they faced extra burdens their straight counterparts did not have.

Without federal marriage equality, gay couples -- no matter how long they've been together -- cannot inherit each other's Social Security benefits, even if they were legally married in the handful of states that allow it.

They can be designated as the beneficiaries of each other's retirement savings, but must pay inheritance taxes that straight widows and widowers do not. In order to make health care decisions on behalf of an incapacitated partner, gay couples must pay additional legal fees to be granted medical power of attorney.

Historically, nothing could stop a hospital or nursing home from forbidding a gay person from visiting their partner, and openly gay people often faced discrimination from health care providers, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force report, "**Outing Age 2010**."

Consequently, many LGBT seniors ended up going back into the closet as their declining health and mobility left them dependent on strangers for help, according to a **study** conducted by the National Senior Citizens Law Center, Lambda Legal and others. Or they were slow to ask for help -- even if they badly needed it.

"When you put that together -- the absence of adult children and a partner to help, and add barriers to accessing services, and limit the financial means others have -- then this very thin network of support breaks at exactly the wrong time, right when there is an increasing need for services," said **Michael Adams**, executive director of the group **Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders, known as SAGE**.

Roll of the dice

Witeck said his retirement plans and those of his friends are nothing like those of their fathers' generation.

"My father was of the generation that thought you put in your time and then you just take off the rest, and many could afford to do it," Witeck said. "He had absolutely no plans and had a generous pension."

His father worked on Capitol Hill for a couple of decades, Witeck said, and was able to retire at 60. He lived another 27 years.

"Over time he did get a little discouraged because he felt like he didn't have a purpose, but that's what the people he knew did," Witeck said. "They just abruptly stopped working. I can tell you, that won't be me."

He has, however, seen some friends whose plans to continue working have been derailed by health problems.

"I do know, as we age, our health can fail, and I've seen it with some friends who aren't as sharp as they once were. So I know it's a roll of the dice on how long we can keep working," he said. "Hopefully I can stay healthy and won't need the help."

But often retirement-age people do need help, and that has not always been easy for the LGBT community.

"There is no question we are making a lot of progress in this area, and we've absolutely been helped along by the emergence of boomers into retirement years, but by the very nature of the enormity of this work, true change will take years," Adams said.

His organization, SAGE, has been working to change the situation for older LGBT people since 1978. Much has changed for the community since then, he said.

"Especially since the Obama administration took office," Adams said. "The federal approach to aging issues has improved."

While there still isn't federal recognition of marriage for gay couples, the federal **Pension Protection Act of 2006** allowed a rollover option to nonspousal beneficiaries. That meant people could leave their pensions to anyone without a tax penalty. In the past, only married spouses were eligible for that benefit.

In 2010, Obama issued a **memorandum** requiring all hospitals receiving Medicare or Medicaid funds -- nearly every hospital in the United States -- to respect the right of all patients to choose who may visit them during a hospital stay, including a same-sex domestic partner. The president also directed the Department of Health and Human Services to help ensure that medical decision-making rights of LGBT patients are respected.

This year the **Administration on Aging** -- the federal agency responsible for funding programs that help the elderly -- finally issued guidance saying agencies and programs it funds should recognize the LGBT population among those with "**the greatest social need.**" That designation means that there should be more financial backing and programs to help elderly gay people.

The Administration on Aging spends more than \$2.3 billion annually on nutrition and social services for the aging, according to Adams, but the LGBT community only sees \$2 million of that.

Finally, Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colorado, introduced the **LGBT Elder Americans Act** this year. If enacted, it would further boost support for the community. As it is written now, the Older Americans Act, which goes up for reauthorization every five years, does not specifically mention LGBT older adults.

Among the LGBT Elder Americans Act's proposals is an amendment that would permanently establish the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging, which would provide training to providers of services to the elderly around the country. It would also require long-term care ombudsmen to collect data relating to discrimination against LGBT older adults.

Creating gay-friendly facilities

On the local level, however, everything may not be as rosy.

"While the laws have become more accepting of marriage equality of the LGBT community and nondiscrimination policies in a broader sense are more inclusive, that doesn't mean people who work with the elderly automatically become more accepting," said **Laurie Young**, director of aging and economic security with the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**.

"There is often high turnover in nursing home staff and a lack of professionalism," she said. "Sometimes even the leadership will get it (being inclusive of LGBT people), but it doesn't get passed on to the people working with the LGBT community."

Several organizations, such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and SAGE, have made training the staffs of senior centers, nursing homes and assisted living facilities a priority. They want those workers to become more sensitive in their work with gay people, particularly because members of the baby boomer generation are more likely to be open about their sexuality than previous generations.

"LGBT people want to experience the services and programs that exist for all older people," Adams said. "So our work has shifted to try and bring along aging and health service organizations so they're as accessible as possible to the LGBT community."

SAGE, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and other groups also train ombudsmen to intervene if an LGBT person comes forward with a complaint. They encourage facilities to create more gay-friendly paperwork, so instead of requesting the name of a husband or wife, the forms include space for a spouse or partner.

Even changing the decorations can help. "These changes don't have to cost a lot," Young said. "We've talked about something as simple as having photos in the lobby of the senior center or nursing home that are more reflective of a broader population -- anything to signal that the space is more welcoming."

Even in the short time that SAGE has been conducting its training, it has seen a difference, Adams said.

"In the past few years we started to notice a real change in the reception of our calls," he said. "We used to reach out to these organizations and hear, 'Oh, we don't have any gay people using our services,' and occasionally we'd have even hostile responses. Now our offers to help have been increasingly met with a desire on the part of these service providers to do a better job working with LGBT folks."

Witeck said he hopes he will never need those support services, but if he does, he's confident his generation will continue to make them more accessible to the LGBT community.

"We, meaning baby boomers, are such a huge and active bunch," Witeck said. "I've seen it so many times before: where we go, institutions change. I know with different generations in the past, there were serious isolation issues and institutions that refused to see us as full human beings."

"But when I think of the arc of change for true equality for LGBT people and how much has gotten better since my generation was in high school and college, it's way beyond what I ever imagined was possible," he added. "And I imagine it will get that much better for all of us, so LGBT people won't have to live in fear when they do need the help."

South Florida's first gay retirement home paving the way

March 24, 2013 — By Diane C. Lade — Sun Sentinel

The kitchen features a hutch with lovely antique blue-and-white plates. One bathroom has a walk-in shower. And lounge chairs surround a good-sized shaded pool in the back.

So what makes this seven-bedroom property different from other large homes nearby? It's South Florida's first gay retirement home.

Tom Duffy, a retired catering business owner, converted what once was a small Wilton Manors assisted living facility to create his dream: Secret Garden, an independent living center where gay men can be themselves as they age.

"I want it to be like a family, more like a commune, I guess," said Duffy, 61, who lives on the property and has been interviewing prospective residents in the past two weeks.

The 4,000-square-foot Secret Garden will provide either a shared or private room, meals and transportation for shopping outings and doctor appointments. Duffy plans to have another person working full-time as his assistant, then other part-timers to do housekeeping, cook and plan activities.

Rents will range from \$2,500 to \$3,500 a month. The facility does not have an assisted living license, Duffy said, but he will help arrange home care for residents with short-term medical emergencies. And he'll help them look for gay-friendly nursing homes or assisted living if their care needs grow beyond what he can handle, he said.

Duffy, trailed by his three small white dogs, shows off the elaborately decorated sitting room with its coral rock fireplace, wicker chairs and scented candles. Gay men probably would find traditional senior living "too impersonal," he said. "I'm confident people will come here."

Who will care for them when they grow old and sick is a constant concern for gay and lesbian elders today, said Chris MacLellan, coordinator of senior services for SunServe, an LGBT social service agency in Wilton Manors.

"Most of them don't have family they can rely on, so they must turn to their friends and neighbors," MacLellan said. "Tom is taking a risk. But I think once he gets some referrals, it will just start to roll."

Secret Garden may not be the area's only gay retirement home for long. MacLellan said representatives from the Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing nonprofit group, which has built and operates popular gay and HIV-friendly, lower-income, government-subsidized apartments in other states, recently toured the area.

And Pete Phillips, president of Palm Beach-based Phillips Development Cos., said he's finalizing financing for Pineapple House in downtown Fort Lauderdale. The combined LGBT-friendly independent, assisted living and memory care center would feature almost 200 units, and have a relationship with Pineapple Point, an upscale gay men's resort on Fort Lauderdale beach.

What will make it work, Phillips believes: The units are rented not purchased, it's in an urban environment, and close to activities LGBT people like.

Communities that struggled

Whether LGBT care centers and retirement complexes become a widespread reality, however, remains to be seen, despite the fact that demographers are predicting there will be 3 million gay Americans older than age 65 by 2030.

Developing gay-friendly retirement housing has been labeled an emerging trend for more than a decade, and a handful of communities have been built around the country. Most are far larger than Duffy's version, with complexes containing as many as 100 or more units, and attached assisted living units for residents who may need more care as they age.

Yet while developers have eagerly explored the new potential niche market, one proposal after another has died on the vine. Many among the few communities nationwide that got off the launch pad have floundered, victims of declining real estate values, poor management or a too-shallow financial foundation.

Hilary Meyer, director of the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging, said it's "baffling why these places aren't thriving. There is so much interest. I really don't have an answer."

The Palms of Manasota, which was hailed as the country's first true LGBT senior community when it opened south of Tampa in 2000, today is in bankruptcy.

Ron Lennon, a college professor formerly from Fort Lauderdale, and his partner bought a villa in the Palms 10 years ago for two reasons: Like many retirees, they wanted a scaled-back lifestyle in a quieter place that still had an arts scene. And like many gays and lesbians, "we wanted to be with like-minded people," said Lennon, who is the president of one of the Palms' two homeowner associations.

The development failed because it was underfunded, Lennon said, causing it to financially collapse in the market downturn. Now some of the foreclosed units are starting to sell — in some cases to straight homeowners who think gay men would make good neighbors, he said.

"They say they feel safe and secure here," Lennon said. "We do things with some of our straight neighbors. We go to dinner and events. It's interesting how our community has evolved over time."

RainbowVision — one of the most widely publicized ventures, catering to lesbians but welcoming to all — also is in bankruptcy. It opened outside Santa Fe, N.M., in 2006. Since then, the roughly 100 residents who envisioned a new utopia found themselves locked in bitter financial battles with management, some filing lawsuits. RainbowVision Properties, which is no longer connected to the Santa Fe operation, now is involved in creating a Vancouver community with a Canadian partner, Plum Living Properties & Health Services.

Financing frustrations

Business partners Cork Chicota and John De Leo of Shaman Development, had similar hopes for eastern Broward County when they joined forces in 2002 and began pulling together multiple projects. They tried everything: a 300-plus unit, high-end, resort-style building that included an advance care wing; a conversion of an existing building; and a small complex supported by tax or government dollars and open to lower-to-moderate-income seniors.

But the financing never gelled for any of them, the partners say, as the housing market turned sour in 2007 and no successful models emerged. Shaman was 45 days from breaking ground on a Fort Lauderdale project in 2008 when the bank, frightened by the RainbowVision fracas, pulled the loan, they said.

Most frustrating, said De Leo, was that LGBT people attending their focus groups insisted senior housing was needed but then wouldn't put down deposits or funding.

"The reality is that while there is a lot of talk, there isn't the level of support required for these projects anywhere in the country," De Leo said. "The seniors who are well off have the money to go wherever they want and can fend for themselves. The whole resort concept and continuing care model we looked at failed, as it has failed for others."


Shaman now has dropped its LGBT focus and is looking at small cottage-style senior developments.

Bruce Gibson, head of Senior Capital Advisors in North Miami, thinks the problem is that there are no prominent examples of long-standing successful LGBT retirement communities to lure risk-adverse lenders — yet. But he thinks the demand will emerge rapidly, as more gay and lesbians boomers come out and any stigma about catering to that niche disappears.

Meyer, of the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging, speculated one reason gay senior housing can't get out of the starting gate is the communities are too scattered, and elders don't want to leave their home states.

Another issue may be the new options are too expensive for many gays and lesbians, who can't tap into their partners' Social Security benefits or pensions. Affordable gay- and lesbian-friendly senior housing projects, which are nonprofits and have resident income limits, have been the most successful so far, Meyer said. Ones such as Triangle Square, in the Los Angeles area, consistently have waiting lists.

Ultimately, the small, creative options like Duffy's Secret Garden may be the ones to pave the way, Meyer said. "As record numbers of LGBT people enter retirement, it seems like there will be a potential market."

dlude@tribune.com or 954-356-4295  *954-356-4295*